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To understand decisions made concerning language usage in "Webster's Third New International Dictionary," it is necessary to realize what standard usage is and how it changes. The definition of standard usage, given in 1932, as that language used by well-educated persons remains valid and depends more and more on professional writers for guidance. The far-reaching liberalization of both written and spoken language since the Second Edition of "Webster's New International" is reflected in the usage of professional writers. Consequently, the label "colloquial" has become unnecessary as a dictionary classification, especially since sharp distinctions between formal and informal language usage are not always clear. Examples of specific word changes connected with the Third Edition are the spelling of "all right" and "callus" and the inclusion of "gimmick," "corny," and "spendiferous" as acceptable rather than slang. (JM)

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Usage in the Dictionary

PHILIP B. GOVE

IN ORDER TO UNDERSTAND decisions about usage, one should probably understand something of the underlying conception of what standard English is, who uses it, and where it is found. Thirty-one years ago Thomas A. Knott, then general editor of *Webster's New International Dictionary*, told the Present-Day English section of the MLA that the mass demand for and mass production of printed matter in this century requires "a corresponding increase in the number of professional writers" (*American Speech*, April 1934, p. 85).

One long-standing and practically self-evident definition of standard English is, again in Knott's phrasing, "that form of the language used by professional writers." The professional writers are all those among us for whom writing together with the consequent dissemination of the matter written is part of their regular professional or occupational task, whether or not self-assigned. The bulk of it is either salaried or commissioned. Professional writers are generally included among the educated. Their mass production forms the main body of written standard English. The relevant definition in *Webster's Third New International* is: "the English that with respect to spelling, grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary is substantially uniform though not devoid of regional differences, that is well-established by usage in the formal and informal speech and writing of the educated, and that is widely recognized as acceptable whereever English is spoken and understood." This is essentially the same as Knott's definition in 1931 or his definition written for *Word Study* in April 1932: "Standard language is that form of language spoken or written by those persons who are generally regarded as well-educated or cultivated or, especially formerly, as belonging to some dominant social group." The reference in "especially formerly" is Knott's way of implying that standard English is no longer in the twentieth century restricted to an adult aristocracy. Admittedly, the use of *educated* in these definitions presents a problem of latitude. Any distinction between the educated and the well-educated is impracticable. The educated are not limited in application to college graduates who have majored in one of the humanities. Broadly it should include those who have graduated from high school and got out of high school what a high school is intended to give. Obviously the educated include college graduates but are not restricted to them. Professional writers, then, constitute a selected part of the educated. Except for phonetic transcriptions, over ninety-nine

Mr. Gove is Editor in Chief of the G. & C. Merriam Company.

percent of the citations on file for dictionary evidence are taken from written words of professional writers.

There is little if any essential difference in the concept of standard English held in the 1930s by the editors of the Second Edition of *Webster's New International* and in the 1950s by the editors of the Third Edition. But the amount of current evidence to be examined is several times greater even than Knott had to deal with, because the current production is greater and because today people depend more and more on professional writers to inform them, guide them, persuade them, and stimulate them. People who succeed in retaining enough sanity and stability to function more or less normally and sensibly come to terms with themselves, with their families, with their occupation, and with their community by means of words, more so of written words than of spoken words. The words which have vitality for writers are the words they use every day, the words they need to express themselves with. Only occasionally do professional writers have a special formal vocabulary. Instead they have a score or two of vocabularies that interfuse with one another but are recognizably appropriate in scores of circumstances. The differences are perceptible in context but may not be in vacuo and often not in abstracted dictionary definitions.

In the Second Edition unlabeled words were held to be suitable for the language of literature and of the lecture platform and pulpit. The label *colloquial* was applied according to the editors' best judgment in the early 1930s. Needless to say liberalization of both written and spoken language since then has been pronounced and far-reaching. As the years went by, the label *colloquial*, along with many others, began to seem stuffy. *Colloquial* has been almost universally misunderstood and misused by being read as an arrow calling attention to words to be avoided. It became clear that the sharp distinction between formal and informal never was as clear as sometimes drawn in the Second Edition and certainly not among professional writers.

The Second Edition does not always give those who want to put the language into a straitjacket the decisions that its supporters claim for it. At the entry *each other*, for example, it notes that "some have sought to restrict *each other* to two as opposed to *one another* but the distinction is disregarded by writers". If the authors cited in the files had sustained a clear-cut distinction between these two expressions, the fact would be recorded. But the editors did not then, anymore than now, recognize any body or individual as having authority to promulgate ironclad prohibitions contrary to usage. A writer is free to prefer in his own use *each other* of two and *one another* of more than two, even to contend that when application is to both two and more than two *one another* is often more appropriate perhaps in view of the predominance of biblical exhortations of the form "This is my commandment, that you love one another" (John 15:12).

The note at *each other* was necessitated by ill-advised interdictions by certain self-appointed castigators of usage. Some of these evolved their interdictions in their attics without reading at all; others with a little knowledge of the history of the language should have known better. For example, the insistence by some handbooks that the adverb *only* when placed elsewhere than immediately before its principal is misplaced is another case of absolutist precision unsupported by professional writers. The advice of the handbooks should end with the enlightened primary instruction "avoid ambiguity." J. Lesslie Hall named 104 authors who placed *only* elsewhere in over 400 sentences.

I should like now to focus these general remarks on some specific words and problems connected with Third Edition. I will try to suggest something of the

way in which definers analyze written evidence in order to arrive at decisions about usage. First a problem in spelling, simple and trivial in itself yet apparently of psychopathic importance on some college campuses.

If I should find that I had sent a letter in my own handwriting to, say, one of my fellow panelists containing the spelling *alright*, I should be annoyed with myself, because I never spell *all right* that way and do not recall ever being corrected in school. The annoyance would consist of some such reasoning as this: why should I carelessly and inadvertently furnish evidence that would or could be used in support of what to me are invalid principles of correctness? If the editor in chief himself writes *alright*, what must one conclude about his dictionary's standards? To be sure, the conclusion is invalidated by the note attached to the entry *alright*, which reads "in reputable use although *all right* is more common". The note is a concession to the editorial staff's own habits which seem to reveal some kind of guilt—if I may be allowed a bit of amateur psychoanalysis—for discovering that *alright* is all right. How did this happen? Middle English gives us a few coalesced examples of the solid form, as well as of *altogether*, *alone*, and *although*. Curiously, the last three came into modern English whereas *alright* seems to be not attested in its early centuries. But there is no basis for assuming the solid form did not exist, for it begins to be of record again in the late nineteenth century. The Second Edition in 1934 entered it with the note "a form commonly found but not recognized by authorities as in good use." A selected chronological list follows:

1893 *Durham University Journal* November 186 (OEDS): I think I shall pass *alright*.

1897 *Westminster Gazette* 16 December 9/3 (OEDS): Witness said, "*Alright*, come along."

1899 *Department of Agriculture Misc. Pub. 290* Sydney, NSW, p. 2: If a lessee or squatter is asked how his stock are faring, he probably will reply that he is *alright* as long as his scrub lasts.

1913 William E. Scott (142-154 E. 32d St., N. Y. C., 25 Sept. 1913): I wish you would submit to your experts the feasibility of putting the word *alright* into use. As a matter of fact it is used quite extensively without the authority of the dictionaries because it is the quick common-sense way of doing. The cable and telegraph companies are the ones who profit by the lack of an authoritative ruling that *alright* is synonymous with *all right*.

1921 A. C. Ludlum in letter to *Nation*, October 26, p. 477:I received a copy of your paper and would state that it may be *alright* for people who are accustomed to thinking backwards.

1925 Marquess Curzon in Ronaldshay *Life* (1928), III, 378 (OEDS): I am sure I shall get through *alright*.

1926 *Vancouver Daily Star*, February 5: Spiritualism, or spiritism, is *alright* as a study in a sane and practical way.
Sporting Goods Dealer, July 15, p. 4: He had the big crowds *alright*.
National Petroleum News, August 18, p. 23: This is *alright* so far as it goes.

1927 *Chiropody Record*, March, p. 7: There's "podologist," perfectly *alright* with many, although it implies lecturing rather than practicing on the feet.
OK Poultry Journal, July, p. 540: He believes that in the selection of breeding stock the Hogan system is *alright*.

1928 H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1936), p. 396: *Alright* officially authorized by the King's Printer at Ottawa for government use.

1931 *The Checkergram*, March, p. 4: Charlie is *alright* so far as we are concerned.

1933 *OED Supplement*: A frequent spelling of *all right*.

1933 Gertrude Stein, *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (Harcourt, Brace), p. 99: The first two years of the medical school were *alright.*

1934 Vivian Ellis, *Faint Harmony* (Stokes), p. 69: Men don't want a woman to wilt on them. That was *alright* in Mother's time.

1936 H. L. Mencken, *The American Language* (1936) p. 407: In my days as a magazine editor I found it [*alright*] in American manuscripts very often, and — it not seldom gets into print. [e.g. by Grace Coolidge, Charles G. Norris, and Wyndham Lewis]

1942 *National Jeweler,* January, p. 111: . . . came out *alright* in the end.
Variety, January 28, p. 18: There's plenty of luxury here *alright.*

1947 *Diseases of the Nervous System,* February, p. 54: We did *alright* after the first time.

1948 [Canada] *Hotel and Restaurant Magazine, September,* p. 50: It was a "fire-resistive" building *alright.*

1950 Hal Ellson, *Tomboy* (Scribner), p. 128: The cops know us *alright.*
Margaret Kennedy, *The Feast* (Rinehart), p. 9: Yes, I did get your letter *alright.*

1952 Pat Frank, *Hold Back the Night* (Lippincott), p. 57: Well, *alright,* but you're going to miss your golf.
American Rifleman, April, p. 47: This is *alright* at 400 yards on the targets.
Langston Hughes, *Laughing to Keep from Crying* (Holt), p. 48: *Alright,* wait a minute.

1953 Rose Thurburn, *The Colour of the Glass* (Morrow), p. 43: You're from Paris *alright.*
Theodora Keogh, *The Tattooed Heart* (Farrar, Straus & Young), p. 191: . . . in a sisterly voice: "*Alright,* tell me what you've got."
Waldo Frank, *Not Heaven* (Hermitage House), p. 175: It's goin' to be *alright.*

1956 Ken Leuty, *The Alaska Sportsman,* July, p. 8: "Well, it seems a crazy idea *alright,* but I might go for it," I told him.

1962 T. J. McManus in *Tasmanian Journal of Agriculture,* May, p. 175: The first batch of aquatic ovines will get by *alright* . . .

Whereas there has never been any difference in meaning or function between the two forms of *all right,* sometimes differences signaled by orthographic variation become lost through inability of user to keep them separate. Recently a Canadian correspondent challenged the inclusion of the noun *callous* as a variant of *callus* in the Third Edition. In reply:

> Like the *Oxford English Dictionary* we too in earlier dictionaries called it an erroneous spelling. Historically the two spellings have been confused since the 17th century. By the middle of the 20th it seems pointless to go on calling this *callous* an error when it turns up in books from reputable publishing houses (Longmans, Green; Simon & Schuster; Houghton Mifflin) including at least one Canadian book (*Land of Afternoon* by G. Knox, 1924), in reputable periodicals (*Nation, Saturday Review, Partisan Review, Young America*), in technical dictionaries (e.g. Flood & West, *Dictionary of Scientific and Technical Words,* 1952), in a Unesco publication (*Inventories of Apparatus & Materials for Teaching Science* vol. III). It is the form used by the National Shoe Manufacturing Association, by some pharmacal companies, and on the containers of medications. One in particular has long been advertising its product as a specific for callouses. Whereas manufacturers and drugstores may not rate very high with respect to appropriate linguistic usage, they have a tremendous influence and undoubtedly have increased by millions the number of people who do not know of any difference between *callous* and *callus.*

In a recent issue of *The English Leaflet* (Fall, 1964), published by the New England Association of Teachers of English, an article entitled "High-School

Humanities Courses: Some Reservations and Warnings" begins with the following paragraph:

> I believe that Humanities courses are a useful gimmick, at this point, for inserting in our school curricula certain things that might otherwise never get there at all, just as the Advanced Placement Program has been—and continues to be—an educational gimmick for helping teachers to introduce curricular and pedagogical reforms which they might otherwise have not been permitted even to consider. I am in favor of the Humanities course, in short, as a temporary gimmick for introducing attitudes and subjects which will gradually bring about reforms until the entire secondary-school curriculum, like that of a liberal-arts college, constitutes a large, clearly departmentalized Humanities course. (p. 31)

The article comes from the pen of the chairman of the English department of a prestigious private Massachusetts college. Clearly to me and obviously to the writer in 1964 *gimmick* seems a completely appropriate word in this context. The covering sense is "a new scheme for achieving an end." But this word is labeled *slang* in the Second Edition, in 1934. It is in Wentworth and Flexner's *Dictionary of American Slang* (1960) and in the second edition of Berrey and Van Den Bark's *American Thesaurus of Slang* (1960). Since the professor quoted would not intentionally use slang without calling attention to it as such before a convention of English teachers, there must be an explanation. I am sure you know what it is: widespread respectable usage in serious context. It never occurred to the user to look in Second Edition or in the slang dictionaries.

The earliest examples of the sense in question come from the spring of 1947. It was *Time* and *Newsweek* that first spread the word by using it week after week. However much one may look down upon those weeklies what happened next is a tribute to their influence. From 1948 down to the present, we have hundreds of examples. The year of burgeoning appears to be 1952. Here is a summary of the evidence.

Among the books:

> recommend aids . . . and all kinds of *gimmicks* for the weight-conscious voyager
>
> —Temple Fielding, *New Travel Guide to Europe* (Sloane, 1948, p. 29)
>
> He turned the "Hoover prosperity" into a *gimmick* for his booming of a Democratic president in 1932
>
> —William Manchester, *Disturber of the Peace* (Harper, 1950, p. 260)
>
> Hundreds of new therapeutic *gimmicks* are making their appearance in the more eccentric Freudian fringes
>
> —Martin Gardner, *In the Name of Science* (Putnam, 1952, p. 290)
>
> The perfect college they hinted at might exist on paper but it would never attract students because it had no selling-point, no *gimmick*
>
> —Mary McCarthy, *The Groves of Academe* (Harcourt, Brace, 1952, p. 80)
>
> for there is no medium or *gimmick* of modern advertising and merchandising that has not been put to the task
>
> —William H. Whyte, Jr., *Is Anybody Listening?* (Simon and Schuster, 1952, p. 6)
>
> they see him in terms of the drama of his career: has he found a *gimmick* that will get him ahead?
>
> —David Riesman, *Individualism Reconsidered* (Free Press, 1954, p. 125)
>
> The Catholic has to hit upon some *gimmick* which will enable him to give the impression of eating his cake and having it, too
>
> —Edmund Wilson, *A Piece of My Mind* (Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1956, p. 16f.)

Among authors in magazines who use the word *gimmick* are Goodman Ace, John Crosby, John Lardner, Bennett Cerf, Alfred Bester, Harriet Van Horne,

Robert M. Yoder, Lois Long, James Sandoe, Jay Dugan, and Drew Pearson. It appears in the following journals: *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science, London Calling, Theatre Arts, Architectural Record, American Cinematographer, Postal Record, Metronome, Book Industry, Professional Photographer, Printers' Ink, Publishers' Weekly, Modern Radio, Advertising Age, Argosy, Ford Times, Women's Wear Daily, Current Biography, Monsanto Magazine, Fortune, The Writer, English Digest, Dance Observer, Audubon Magazine, Partisan Review, Nations' Business, Saturday Night, Bookman, Popular Science, Motion Picture, Scientific American.* It appears in the following newspapers: *Los Angeles Examiner, New York Times, Herald-Tribune, Christian Science Monitor, Times-Picayune, Wall Street Journal, Nassau Guardian,* etc.

There is no question that *gimmick* can be used to belittle what it is applied to but that role does not make the word informal, colloquial, or slang. Some people seem to affect a hypersensitivity to any word with pejorative connotations. That involves confusing the status of a thing, act, or activity with the status of a word. Although being drunk is reprehensible in our middle-class society, it does not necessarily follow that all adjectives describing one who is drunk are slang. Since, however, writers inevitably display a wide range of subjective feeling about the appropriateness of such adjectives, sooner or later in a large gathering of evidence most of the adjectives meaning "drunk" turn up in serious writing with observable regularity.

Why did I spot *gimmick* in the article that started all this? I was middle-aged before any of the evidence cited was in existence. Without this evidence I could have agreed with the Second Edition's *slang* label. Without my experience as a dictionary maker I could perhaps today be looking down on freshmen who use *gimmick*, especially if I were to refuse to believe what the Third Edition says.

The Third Edition puts a slang label on the word *cornball* but not on *corny*, because *corny* frequently occurs in serious writing by serious, respectable, and dignified writers. The entry illustrates this by quoting Stephen Potter, the *Atlantic, Time,* and Frederick Lewis Allen. There is no shirking of responsibility but a careful attempt to give reliable help. If anyone has the opinion that *corny* is slang, he is wrong and the Third Edition tells him so. It makes clear also that usage is not consistent or logical. *Corny* does not have to be slang just because *cornball* is. The adjective *corny* has been in our language for over 600 years (as in "corny ale") but it didn't come to be used in this special sense of "tiresomely trite or old-fashioned or naïve" as in the phrase "a corny joke" until the twentieth century. In the 1930s musicians were using it as jargon for unsophisticated songs and countrified swing music, figuratively *cornfed.* Our earliest book example (it had been used in *Time* magazine in 1933) comes from Sigmund Spaeth in 1934. After that it turns up in reviews and music commentaries. It was soon extended to stage entertainment generally, then broadened to storytelling and finally to everyday use as a disparaging term for anything looked down on for being trite, old-fashioned, or naïve.

By the 1940s the word turns up everywhere: *American Mercury, Time, Commonweal* ("corny epigrams"), *Nation, Printers' Ink,* Howard Barnes and Mary Ross in the *Herald-Tribune* ("corny situation"), Professors Howard Mumford Jones and Esther K. Sheldon in *American Speech,* Elmer Rice, Manny Farber, Harold Clurman, and E. E. Cummings in *New Republic* ("corny people"), Frederick Lewis Allen, Bennett Cerf, Goodman Ace, Hallis Alpert, Peter Viereck, Jonathan Daniels, and Bergen Evans in *Saturday Review* ("corny elo-

quence," "corny humor," "corny prize contest," "corny romances"), Joseph Wechsberg in the *Baltimore Sun*, Edward Weeks and J. P. Marquand in the *Atlantic* ("corny scenes," "corny sayings"), Robert M. Coates and A. J. Liebling in the *New Yorker*, John Lardner, Bosley Crowther, and A. H. Raskin in the *N. Y. Times* ("corny drama"), Philip Wylie in the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the Rev. Dr. Nelson Rightmyer asks in an article on preachers "are the sermons more corny than the speeches you hear?"

Our files have many examples from England, for example, *London Calling*, Stephen Potter in the English *Saturday Review*, *Encounter*, *Punch*, J. B. Priestley and William Salter in the *New Statesman*, from Ireland (the *Irish Digest*), and from Canada (Earle Birney's "corny geniality"). Also from many books besides Spaeth's: William J. Reilly's *Life Planning for College Students*, Maritta Wolf's *Back of the Town*, Frank Luther Mott's *News in America*, Herman Wouk's *Caine Mutiny*, Richard Joseph's *Your Trip to Britain*, Temple Fielding's *New Travel Guide to Europe*, Coulton Waugh's *The Comics*, Peggy Bennett's *The Varmints*, and a medical journal, *Diseases of the Nervous System*. Between 1940 and 1956 there are scores more. Faced with such evidence no one can doubt the frequency, range, and established status of the word *corny*. Of course it belongs in the dictionary with no label.

The editors of the *OED* decided that the nineteenth-century reappearance of *splendiferous* was jocular, apparently because the current citations came from the United States, for they saw nothing jocular in British use of *splendacious*, *splendescent*, *splendidious*, or *splendious*. Fowler branded *splendiferous* facetious and George P. Krapp said it was humorous. How they were sure of these labels remains a mystery, but handbooks and teachers familiar with these authorities have kept on stigmatizing the word, and since few of us see the evidence all at once, it is easy not to change. One occurrence per year per teacher can have little influence. In theory perhaps after twenty or thirty years he might reflect "I seem to recall seeing *splendiferous* more and more in uses not jocular" but it's too late; his mind has been fixed. He fails to observe that *splendiferous* may be used not jocularly. *The Nation* used it appropriately of a music hall in 1913. Carl Sandburg in *Abraham Lincoln* (1926) refers to an orator who was "speechifying *splendiferously* with arms uplifted." The novelist Barry Benefield in 1935 wrote of the "*splendiferous* paraphernalia of breakfast" which consisted of "a shining silver-plated coffee pot, orange juice in silver-plated bowls of crushed ice, silver-plated tureen of oatmeal, silver-plated pitcher of cream, [and] bacon and eggs in a dish with a silver-plated [cover]." In the pages of *Modern Language Notes* (June, 1947), a scholar writes of "gothically elaborate and *splendiferous*" architecture. A *Time* writer (October 27, 1947) says that "for three decades DeMille's name has been loosely used as shorthand for fustian and *splendiferous* vulgarity" and calls Lucius Beebe a "self-made expert on the art of *splendiferous* living" (January 31, 1949). Gerald W. Johnson in *Herald-Tribune Books* (November 2, 1947) says of Roger Butterfield's *American Past: a History of the United States:* "His publishers have taken his work seriously and upon the mechanics of its presentation have lavished a wealth of typographical art that recalls to memory the splendid, or at least *splendiferous*, days prior to 1929." From the *Saturday Evening Post* in 1949 (March 5) comes "Inside are what must have been among the most *splendiferous* public rooms of that *splendiferous* period." Others are:

> the oil-rich who worked to live up to the *splendiferous* black fountains erupting on their lands

—LeRoy Leatherman, *The Caged Birds* (1950, p. 188)

The Merry Widow is a *splendiferous* Hollywood operetta built around the famous Franz Lehar score

—*Newsweek* (October 13, 1952, p. 103)

MGM has just resurrected *The Prisoner of Zenda,* and given it the most *splendiferous* trappings it's ever had

—D. Mosdell, *Canadian Forum* (January 1953, p. 232)

President Syngman Rhee, anxious for international prestige, has *splendiferous* plans for an international airline, an ocean-going merchant marine, and several luxury hotels

—*Time* (October 19, 1952, p. 106)

memories of his own fairy-tale childhood spent among crowned and sceptered relatives in castles, palaces and *splendiferous* watering places

—*Time* (April 26, 1954, p. 88)

names, however *splendiferous,* and presidential sponsorship, however fervent, cannot avail against the drive of an efficient organization dedicated to getting out the vote

—Raymond Moley, *Newsweek* (September 16, 1957, p. 128)

Despite the fact that Gilbert M. Tucker had in 1921 in his *American English* listed *splendiferous* as an exotic Americanism at the same time that he quoted the word's first attested use in George Ashby's poem *Dicta Philosophorum* of the fifteenth century, by mid-twentieth century it had become a part of standard English, a working adjective admittedly journalistic but in the best sense of the word. Only in the older handbooks is the word *journalistic* pejorative.

Let us suppose that we agree that the label *colloq* should not have been abandoned and that we were free to insert it in a new printing of the Third Edition or the *Seventh Collegiate.* Who will undertake the inserting and on what basis? (Consideration of foreigners and children should be omitted from the answers, for the editors deliberately ignored their special needs.) The questions are here chiefly rhetorical, but they have been partly answered by H. A. Gleason in a letter to the *Hartford Times* (March 16, 1962): "The critics of the new dictionary have failed to bring forth any criterion by which a conscientious editor could make the judgments that they desire him to make." Let us instead of arguing about such labels as *colloq, informal, vulgar, low,* and *slang* settle for the use of a sign—an obelus (÷)—to mean "people have divided opinions about the propriety of this word" or "some people consider this inelegant." Who will take the responsibility for scattering the sign throughout the dictionary? What will it mean to the user? What a topsy-turvy English-speaking world when all conscientious dictionary users who aspire to be among the elect stop—or try to stop—using all the words with an obelus.

Who Is Untuning the String?

ETHEL STRAINCHAMPS

WHAT, WOULD YOU SAY, are the odds against running into the word *tremulo* (or the word *tremolo,* for that matter) three times in one evening's browsing through nonmusical essays in the current issues of some of the country's top periodicals?

When I saw the first one I thought it

Miss Stainchamps was born and raised in the Missouri Ozarks; she switched from the rural to the urban dialect when she started to high school and got interested in usage levels.